The Sugar Industry on the Sunshine Coast

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The sugar industry in Australia has brought wealth not only to the Nation as a whole, but social stability to many areas of coastal Queensland. The influence of sugarcane farming, and the families who pursued this specialised agricultural way of life, contributed much to the pioneering development of the estuarine tropical and sub-tropical land of the State.

Sugar has occupied a unique position in the social development of Queensland. Early this century it broke new sociological ground when farmers of European descent, and in many cases of European birth, worked at hard manual labour in the humid, coastal tropics.

Agriculture generally has been marked by uncertain prices for its produce, resulting in financial insecurity. In the case of the sugar industry, security and stability followed massive government intervention involving compulsory acquisition of all raw sugar by the Queensland government, an embargo on imports, and prohibition of cane growing except on land assigned by the regulatory body which also controlled the price of cane and the sale of farms. A quota system known as the peak year scheme was subsequently added, limiting the output of each mill and each farm, preventing gluts. Government finance was responsible for the development of co-operative sugar mills owned by canegrowers. The 1915 *Regulation of Sugar Cane Prices Act* and *Sugar Acquisition Act* of the newly elected Labor Government complemented post World War I by the Commonwealth embargo and generous sugar price provided an unprecedented period of stability.

In what is now the Sunshine Coast, this farm security — combined with proximity to the towns of Brisbane, Nambour, Gympie and Maryborough — enabled more than three generations of farmers to lead prosperous, albeit very physically demanding lives. For a century the sugar industry has been the largest agricultural undertaking in the State. By 1960, Australia had grown to be the fourth-largest sugar producer in the world, after Cuba, Brazil and India; and was producing at that time over 11 million tons of standing cane from which more than 1 million tons of raw sugar were extracted each year.

This paper records my boyhood experiences during several months spent on a typical sugarcane farm in the Maroochy Shire. As such, it records a glimpse of the life and times of cane farming families in the south-east corner of the State; and perhaps from the perspective of fifty years later, draws some lessons for future lifestyles.

SUGAR FARMING IN QUEENSLAND

Sugar cane requires a very rich fertile soil, essentially flat land, warm dry winters with high intensities of sunshine, and hot wet summers with predictable rainfall. The rich river flats of the Maroochy and Noosa Shires and the black and red volcanic soils of the region were ideal for sugar cane and the wet summers and dry winters produced canes of high sugar content.

At least 50 acres of assigned land were needed for a family to be self-sufficient in the 1930s and 1940s. The Garrett farm at Bli Bli had an assignment of 50 acres; and the Wellard Farm (on which the author lived in 1946) had 60. Mr Fred Fink was farming on the Maroochy River during the 1930's and won a prosperous living from 60 acres of assigned land.

There were some thirty sugarcane farms along Petrie Creek, a tributary of the Maroochy River. This Creek extended westward from the river to the prosperous town of Nambour which surrounded the Moreton Central Sugar Mill.

The farms were essentially hand-worked. This meant a very hard-working lifestyle for all family members. With the security of the cane assignment, farmers could supplement their income from other crops but these latter were always subject to the vagaries of the price at the market, on the day.

The cane farmers were paid, then as now, according to a formula which was calculated from two inputs — from the tonnage of cane stalks delivered to the mill and the C.C.S. or Commercial Cane Sugar content. The formula was designed to reward farmers for sweet cane and mills for technological efficiency.

Many varieties of sugarcane have been grown in south-east Queensland. The Badila variety was one of the most popular in the first decades of the twentieth century. In the Bli Bli region, Badila had been phased out by 1930, replaced by D1135 (also known as "Demerara" from the place of its origin in the West Indies).

D1135 was a very thick cane, maturing with deep purple stalks. Other varieties grown in the 1930's included Q813 and, from 1933, the "Hamilton Seedling". Further north, extending into Noosa and Gympie Shires, were grown strains such as POJ2878, also known as the "Java Wonder" cane.

Government regulation of the industry meant that family life also was relatively secure. This provided an environment for immigration, not only by farmers from other parts of Australia, but also from overseas. The sugar industry in Queensland has been greatly enriched, and in some areas dependent upon the traditions of farming skills from other countries. The Italian communities at Ingham, Yugoslavian communities near Cairns, and Spanish, Maltese and Polish communities have all been very important indeed in establishing self-supporting ethnic groups, at the base of which pyramids are the security of the sugar growing system.

The Bli Bli Valley was a heterogeneous mix, with a small group of Finns including the Suosaari and Savamaki families. There were approximately thirty cane farms along Bli Bli Road, half a century ago. These farming families included, the Blackburn, Buckland, Davey, Davies, Garrett, Hawthorne, Hegarty, Ivy Lyell, Saint, Savamaki, Sousaari and Wellard families.

There were a similar number of farms along the Maroochy River, with families such as the Andersons and the Finks. Most of the farms along the Maroochy River were not accessible by road, but were serviced daily by the ferry that ran from Maroochydore to Yandina, a craft which criss-crossed the river, calling at each farm's landing stage, as required. This was one of Australia's few floating post offices. Besides delivering mail and supplies (as a travelling shop), it also collected school children for schooling at Dunethin Rock and Yandina. Three fragmentary vignettes of those sugar families illustrate the times.

Neil Buchanan operated a mixed dairy, banana and sugar cane farm in the period 1938 to 1944. He supplied to the Mount Bauple Sugar Mill, a co-operative mill between Gympie and Maryborough, the next mill north from Nambour, and one that was perennially short of sufficient cane for sustained profitability. Buchanan had an assignment of just eight acres. His reflections are typical of cane farmers of south-east Queensland. He noted:

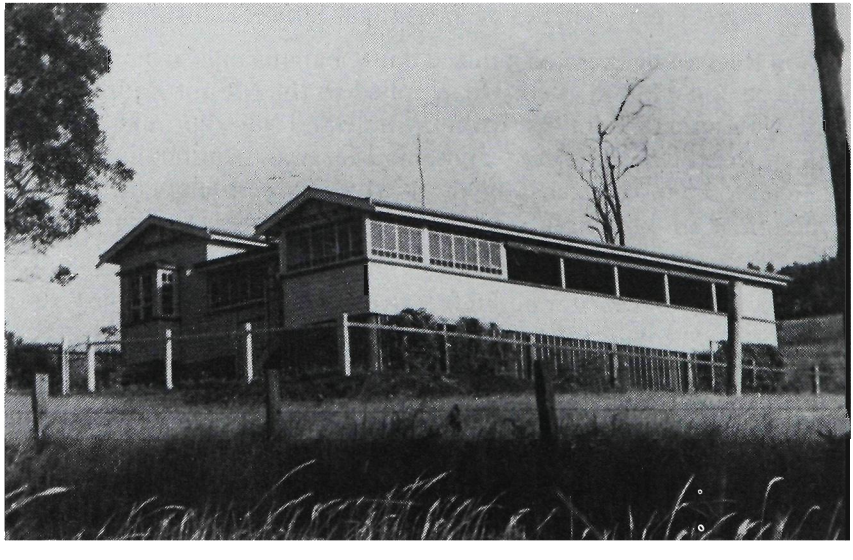
> We could grow cane for nothing! The horses were grass-fed, the land was rich and we never used fertiliser; no irrigation was needed. We ploughed and planted the cane ourselves, weeded it by-hand and then cut it and transported it ourselves to the Bauple Sugar Mill. That small area of 8 acres over the years paid for the rest of the farm.

Fred Fink and his family farmed 60 acres on the Maroochy River, from 1933. Their farm was self-sufficient in cane, and they grew a series of varieties including the newly introduced "Hamilton Seedling". They were one of the first farms in the region to be mechanised, after the procurement of a Farmall Tractor.

Nicholas Wellard (my uncle, with whom I lived at Bli Bli in 1946) was born in Port Arthur in Tasmania. He had been a carter and timber hauler using a bullock team near Port Arthur. He "carried his swag" in 1931 during the great depression and was one of the pioneer sawmillers at the sawmill established on a landing station on the Daintree River in north Queensland. He married the young primary school teacher (Mildred Pearn, my aunt) and they established a cane farm near Mossman. Like many others, they fled before the impending Japanese invasion of north Queensland. In 1944 they bought a sugar cane farm on Bli Bli Road, which had 60 acres assigned to Moreton Central Mill. Nicholas and Mildred Wellard became prominent members of the Nambour community. Nicholas was subsequently elected as a Director of the Nambour Co-Operative.

THE CANE SEASON IN SOUTH-EAST QUEENSLAND

The cycle of the agricultural year is no more predestined than that seen in the sugar industry. The year was divided into two halves — the "crushing" and the "slack". The crushing season always started in the first or second week of July, and normally finished before Christmas. The growing cycle commenced with ploughing, usually done with a two-horse team until the advent, in the latter 1930s, of the first tractors in the region. Wellard's team of two horses including one which was a part Clydesdale. The other was an old blind horse who was an indefatigable worker; and who everyday would unerringly find her way to the water trough, and then back to the house yard fence where a treat was often awaiting her. Many of the farmers



A typical weatherboard farm house of a prosperous sugar cane farm, the Wellard farmhouse on Bli Bli Road, ca 1949.

preferred to use teams of horses rather than tractors because of the flat, low lying nature of the land, which was either a rich black or a red volcanic soil. When wet, it was difficult to manage with mechanised farming. Often relatively small areas were being planted and worked and under these circumstances it was often easier to use horses which were also more reliable than the machinery of the time. Until the late 1930's planting was undertaken by a simple drill method, or by hand. On our farm, the setts were planted by a horse-drawn combine planter, which not only planted the setts but drilled-out and fertilised in the same operation.

Weed control was of great importance. Until the late 1940's, no chemical weedicides were used. No tractor could pick its way through the rows of cane without damaging the young plants. A single horse drew the scarifier on the Wellard farm. The scarifier destroyed many of the weeds, but those close to the emergent cane had to be dealt with by hand-held hoe. Hoeing the cane fields for weed control, always called "chipping", was the ubiquitous task of all members of the cane growing family, including the children. Until the cane was a metre or so in height, and even occasionally after that, weeds had to be cut manually.

My occasional role, as a six-year old boy, was as "billy-boy", carrying water for the workers and bringing "smoko", hot tea in a billy, from the farmhouse to the field, or from a depot point to the farmer working along the rows. I can remember getting lost in the rows of 2 metre high cane on one occasion. Workers in the fields, even in the sub-tropics of the Sunshine Coast region, lost a prodigious amount of water through perspiration. In the hot, humid conditions of the region in summer, working in the wind-protected corridors between the rows of cane, fluid losses were great. Cane-cutters in particular always had to drink more than 10 litres or so of water or tea each day whilst they were in the fields; and sometimes, particularly in the more northern cane fields, twice that amount had to be consumed to compensate for extreme fluid loss.

The "season" or the "crushing" always commenced with the first cane fires — beautiful but frightening affairs when the farmer would set his cane alight to burn the trash. This scarcely affected the sugar content, but it removed a lot of the dead, razor-sharp and serrated leaves of the cane which otherwise cut the cane-cutters. It also killed vermin in the fields, and drove out snakes. There were a large number of Eastern Brown snakes in the fields, and the occasional taipan — two of Australia's most dangerous snakes. The firing of the cane had become mandatory since the early 1930's, when leptospirosis (Weil's disease) became a major problem in the northern cane fields, an infection caused by contamination of cuts with the urine of rats which

lived in the fields. Industrial action in the Ingham region reached a crescendo, until the regular firing of cane (and hence the protection of workers in the cane industry) was conceded. Cane fires generate enormous heat and are a spectacular sight, being visible from high ground more than 30 kilometres away. With the mechanical harvesting of cane, green harvesting with mechanical separation of the green trash from the stalks is becoming increasingly common.

Cane-cutters in the Sunshine Coast region were often the farmers themselves, although contract cutters would come from afar. They always worked bare-chested in shorts, and often bare-footed as well. Tradition was that they were totally looked after by the farms on which they were working. They were provided with board and lodging and all meals, which were of the highest quality and which were always home-cooked by the farmer's wife herself.

In 1946, the cane-cutters were paid a tonnage rate of 6 shillings per ton for cane delivered and weighed on arrival at the Moreton Central Mill. The cane was loaded onto the locomotive trucks which were shunted off the main tracks, at tiny sidings. The "loco" ran on a network of two foot gauge tracks radiating from the mill. The lines ran along the river flats from Nambour, along Petrie Creek, through Bli Bli to the Maroochy River. Other tracks snaked northwards towards Yandina and towards Eumundi. Steam was raised in the locomotive each morning with a wood fire in the fire box. Once "steam was up" it then ran on coal. On one occasion the burning coal set fire to the cane on our farm in "the slack", with disastrous results.

After the crushing season, some of the scarcely mature cane was allowed to "stand over" until the next season. Normally there were one or two ratoon crops following each planting. In that era all the cane was"ploughed out" every three years. This latter was undertaken both as a developed tradition for disease control, and because sugar yield fell with each succeeding ratoon crop. The farmers in the region invariably used a cyclic approach to planting, ratooning and then "ploughing out". Some cane was planted on each farm, each year.

After the cane had been crushed at the mill, the filter press residue of the crushing process was brought back to the farms as excellent fertiliser. It had an appalling smell, and my aunt Mildred recalls that, "the cane had to grow fast to get away from the smell". Two fertilisers were used on the Wellard farm — sulphate of ammonia and superphosphate. Many farms did not use fertiliser in that era. It was always used sparingly and there was no pollution from high nitrate or phosphate run-off in that era.

THE FARMING DAY

All farms in the area had their own supplementary crops of one sort or another. The Wellard farm grew some pineapples (on the hills), bananas (on the well drained steep northern slopes on the sides of Bli Bli valley) and beans. The variety of beans which were grown were "Brown Beauties", a variety of French bean that bore heavily and was a good cash crop if all the other farmers were not growing beans at the same time. The growing of beans was back-breaking work; and hand-picking was a trial for the farm children who invariably had to help with this task; and an ordeal for adults. I recall that a family of two adults and three children were able to pick four cases of beans in a day bringing a much needed supplement to the family income if there was no glut. Some farmers were able to employ a farm labourer for part of the year, and these men and their families often lived in smaller dwellings on the farms themselves. Where this was the case, many of the farmers allowed their workmen to cultivate small areas of land for their own cash crops of beans, vegetables and fruit.

Electricity was not introduced into the Bli Bli Valley until the 1950's, and it was unusual for farms to have their own generators. The Wellard

A typical farm labourer's cottage ca 1959, this on Wellard's farm, Bli Bli Road with Petrie Creek in the middle distance.

farm in 1946 was typical of the sugar farms of that era. The working day started with the farmer and his wife arising well before dawn, usually between 4.30 and 5a.m. The farmer's wife would first milk the two or three house cows. This, together with the milk obtained from the previous night's milking, would then be separated and the cream stood aside, and the skimmed residue milk fed to a small sty of pigs kept for house bacon. Milking in the morning, together with the early household chores, and the night's activities were conducted by the light of hurricane lanterns. After the second World War, the new pressure lanterns with their incandescent mantles were a great boon and produced light of a much greater intensity although hurricane lanterns were still generally used for routine farm work at night.

The farmers worked in the fields during the day. The farmer's wife would take him lunch and hot tea to the fields. The farmers invariably "washed up" at the end of day when the work was done, for a sit-down meal. If the farmer returned to the farmhouse for lunch, he would listen to the farm news on the radio. The radio news in the evenings, heard by the light of hurricane lamps, was a regular ritual. Most farms had a Motorola or an His Master's Voice valve-driven radio. Most of the farming families retired to bed early, usually by 8pm.

The farms of the region were essentially self-sufficient. Fish (particularly bream) was always available in nearby Petrie Creek, and mud crabs (now a great gourmet delicacy) were there for the taking. Fish and crabs were on the diet every week. The farmhouse was self-sufficient in butter, cream, milk, eggs, poultry, and fruit and vegetables, with bananas, pineapples, rosellas and citrus fruits being plentiful. Many of the farmers' wives used the recently introduced "Vacola Bottling Outfit" to preserve fruits which were in glut during their individual seasons. This fruit preservation system meant that all farmhouses had big larders with shelves filled with glass Vacola preserving bottles. The system was generally safe, although a number of cases of botulism from incorrectly sterilised home preserves occurred in that era.

AFTERMATH

Farm life was extremely physically demanding, and required families of high intelligence to be successful in the husbandry of sugar cane. Over recent decades, a number of the smaller farms have been consolidated, and assigned land combined to provide farms with a greater secured income. The extreme fertility of the estuarine land, and the development of fast road systems, bridges (e.g. that over the Maroochy River at Bli Bli), and the demand for hobbyfarms and

holiday homes has meant the loss of much non-assigned land. The stability of the cane growing system, and Australia's favourable competitive position on world sugar markets has meant however that most Mills extended the acreage of assigned land after the 1950s; but kept the system still under strict control to preserve the standards of living of the farmers who comprised the industry.

The schools of the cane growing areas have been amalgamated and consolidated into larger schools. When I attended Bli Bli State School (in 1946) it was a one-teacher school with some 30 pupils. Fifty years later (in the 1990s) the school is a very large one with many hundreds of pupils. The walk to school of fifty years ago (of some 3 kilometres) is now never walked by children, who are invariable driven to school, or collected by the local school buses of the region.

The farmers from that era generally lived long lives. The healthy out-door lifestyle, albiet one of physically demanding work, and the perfect diet of fresh fruit and vegetables, with excellent protein nutrition, left indeed a good legacy. The health of those farmers was compromised, however, in two particular areas. Skin cancers were universal amongst them; and arthritis was also the inevitable lot of those working in the physically-demanding conditions of those pre-mechanised days. The lessons from the past, however, are those of the importance of agricultural security in a partly controlled, partly competitive industry which gave a stable base to the whole of rural society; and the stability and security of family life which this brought, in its turn.